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Editorial: All they did was ask

Kokomo Tribune Editorial Board

Ben Jacobs, a reporter for The Guardian, had a simple question for Republican congressional candidate Greg Gianforte on Wednesday. It was the day before the state's special election at a campaign event, and Jacobs had been trying in vain to record a response from Gianforte on the newly released Congressional Budget Office score on the Senate version of the American Health Care Act. The audio from Jacobs' recorder picked up his question and then the loud crashes immediately after.

"I'm sick and tired of you guys!" Gianforte screamed. "The last guy that came in here, you did the same thing! Get the hell out of here!"

Even after being attacked, Jacobs kept his wits about him.

"You just body-slammed me and broke my glasses," said Jacobs. "You'd like me to get the hell out of here, I'd also like to call the police. Can I get you guys' names?"

Jacobs was taken to the hospital for X-rays. Police were called as Gianforte quickly fled the scene.

"Tonight, as Greg was giving a separate interview in a private office, Jacobs entered the office without permission, aggressively shoved a recorder in Greg's face, and began asking badgering questions," read a hastily prepared statement by the campaign. "Jacobs was asked to leave. After asking Jacobs to lower the recorder, Jacobs declined. Greg then attempted to grab the phone that was pushed in his face. Jacobs grabbed Greg's wrist, and spun away from Greg, pushing them both to the ground. It's unfortunate that this aggressive behavior from a liberal journalist created this scene at our campaign volunteer BBQ."

If anything Jacobs was downplaying what happened. A Fox News crew witnessed the entire scene.

“Gianforte grabbed Jacobs by the neck with both hands and slammed him into the ground behind him. [Field producer Faith Mangan, photographer Keith Railey] and I watched in disbelief as Gianforte then began punching the reporter. As Gianforte moved on top of Jacobs, he began yelling,” wrote Fox News reporter Alicia Acuna.

Gianforte was cited for misdemeanor assault and will have to appear in court sometime before June 7.

This incident has become part of a sad trend of late. Dan Heyman, a reporter for the Public News Service, was arrested May 9 for "willful disruption of governmental processes," a misdemeanor, for asking questions

of Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price in the hallway of the West Virginia State Capitol. (Price later praised the arrest.) It didn't end there.

"John M. Donnelly, a reporter for CQ Roll Call, said that he was shoved against a wall by two security guards after he tried to ask questions to an FCC commissioner following the open commission meeting," reported Variety's Ted Johnson on May 18.

These developments are disturbing to say the least. How we respond to these incidents will either discourage or encourage repeat performances by others. Reporters have an obligation to ask officials questions in public spaces. This is not how adults in the United States should behave.